With William Allen White at the Front

BLESSED be the humorists, for they light up the world—and the world sadly needs lighting up these days. William Allen White's *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me* should be thrice blessed, for man and book light up a world in the gloom of war.

The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me is such a book as tempts you into unguarded enthusiasms and comparisons. It makes it easy to say of it, "Another *Innocents Abroad*," which it resembles in scheme and laughter except that the two travellers in this book went abroad in a world infinitely more tragic than did Mark Twain.

An Honest Recital.

You can't turn war into a joke even by a trick, and this book is not a trick. It is honest from the first word to the last. Nor is its honesty merely negative. It tells things that require courage in the telling. It is as unswerving as Barbusse's *Under Fire*, to which, however, it offers the greatest possible contrast; but in its own way it is almost as effective.

But where Barbusse shows the war rending human flesh White shows the human spirit somehow standing it and even essaying a smile. This does not mean that *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me* is superior spiritually to *Under Fire*. After all, Barbusse is France for four years in the shambles while White is America with its uniform as yet hardly wrinkled. Barbusse is a poilu sleeping in mud, living under barrage, trampling in carnage. White is an American Red Cross inspector, feted and sheltered, on an errand of mercy. But he goes out of his way to see—and what he sees is bad enough; and still he can smile in the telling.

Humor—With Depth.

This, in an honest man, is sheer miracle—and welcome. It is the same miracle that can crack a joke such as White tells as coming from a soldier who sees his companion come splashing down the trench. "Say, Alf," he calls, "tyke yer muddy feet out o' the only water we got to sleep in." It takes either an extremely superficial spirit or one indeed profound to see and evoke a smile out of war; and White is anything but superficial.

The book gives a vivid picture of Europe at this hour. To a European it gives as vivid a portrait of America; for if ever America, the best of it, was embodied in an individual he is William Allen White as this book reveals him, and in this case the book is the man. He describes himself and his companion, Henry J. Allen, editor and owner of the Wichita *Beacon*, as "short, fat, bald, middle aged inland Americans, from fresh water colleges in our youth and arrived at New York by way of an often devious yet altogether happy route leading through politics, where it was rough going and unprofitable for years; through business, where we still found it easy to sign, possible to float, and hard to pay, a ninety day note."

Two on a Ship.

Here is America typically reacting to something so vast that it threatens to swamp its cheerfulness. The two are on board ship going over, and they encounter the ocean. It sets them yearning for home. "It was a critical moment. If it had kept on that way we would have got off the boat and trudged back home through a sloppy ocean and let the war take care of itself. Then Henry's genius rose.

"Henry is the world's greatest kidder. Give him sixty days' immunity in Germany and he would kid the divine right of kings out of Germany. He began kidding the ocean. His idea was that he would get Wichita to vote bonds for one that would bring tide water to Main street. He didn't want a big ocean—just a kind of oceanette with a seating capacity of 5,000 square miles."

Later Henry begins to weary of the Atlantic. "'The town boosters who secured this ocean for this part of the country rather overdid the job,'" he says. * * * "'There's got to be a lot of money spent draining it; you can tell that at a glance, if the fellow gets anywhere with his proposition.'"

Enter, War.

The war first comes home to them when on deck one night while smoking a cigar Henry is tapped on the shoulder and a voice says:

"You'll have to put out that cigar, sir. A submarine could see that five miles on a night like this!"

WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE.

Later on the voyage it comes still more vividly.

"One evening at twilight we were looking at a sailing ship far over to the south—a mere speck on the horizon's edge. Signals began to twinkle from her and we felt our ship give a lurch and turn north, zigzagging at full speed. The signals of the sailing ship were distress signals, but we sped away from her as fast as our engines would take us, for, though her signals may have been genuine, also they may have been a U-boat lure. Often the Germans have used the lure of distress on a sailing ship and when a rescuer has appeared the U-boat has sent to death the good Samaritan of the sea!"

THE HELL of WAR, from "THE MARTIAL ADVENTURES of HENRY and ME"

Illustrations by Tony Sarg.

And Henry, via the author, thus comments in terms of Wichita:

The U-boat captain, using the distress signal as a lure, probably holds about such a place in his home town as Charley Carey, our banker, or Walter Innes, our dry goods man. He is doubtless a leading citizen of some German town; doubtless a kind father, a good husband and maybe a pillar of the church. And I suppose town and home and church will applaud him when he goes back to Germany to brag.

Their reactions to Paris are humorous and yet an unforgettably clear picture in spite of the medium of a strongly colored individuality. From there the contrast is swift and stark to the ruin of what was Verdun, and still under fire. Great German shells explode near them and bring havoc. Ambulances go into the cloud of battle empty and return full. Hospitals marked with huge Red Crosses are bombed by the Germans. But the two onlookers remain the same homely, unhating, deeply feeling men mellowed with humor and humanity. What they see above it all is

* * * courage—that thing which the Germans thought was their special gift from heaven, bred of military discipline * * * we know now is the commonest heritage of men. It is the divine fire that proves the case for democracy. In crises the rich man, the poor man, the thief, the harlot, the laborer, the teacher, the preacher, the ignorant, the wise, all go to death for something that defies death, something immortal in the human heart. Those truck drivers, those mule whackers, those common soldiers, that doctor, these college men on the ambulance, are brothers to-night in the democracy of courage. Upon that democracy is the hope of the race, for it bespeaks a wider and deeper kinship of men.

It is this indomitable vision in the book that makes it easy for the reader to laugh with White when he laughs. You feel that if such a man sees humor in a situation no matter how grim the humor is honestly there. They are at Recicourt when some German shells descend near them with a sound that seems to White as though "some one suddenly had picked up the whole Haynes hardware store at Emporia—tinware, farm implements, stoves, nails and shelf goods—and had switched it with an awful whizz through the air and landed it upon the sheet iron roof of Wichita's Civic Forum, which seats 6,000!" Some one grabs him by the arm and says:

"Come on! Let's go to the abri!"

Says White:

"Abri was a brand new word to me, but it seemed to be some place to go and that was enough for me."

A Hasty Draft.

They are taken to a sheltered barn and as they lunch they hear the shells bursting just outside. Henry is writing as he eats and some one asks him:

"What are you writing, Mr. White?"

"I'm sketching," stuttered the Wichita statesman, "a sort of a draft of the American terms of peace."

No more severe test of the author's courage, sympathy and depth of vision and no better proof of sterling humanity can be found anywhere than in his treatment of the reaction of war on the women of France and of England. It takes courage, indeed, to report, sympathy to understand and vision to give proportion to what he has observed on this phase of the war. After such a test as this there is nothing to do but give the writer one's trust, surrender to his wile and guile and to laugh, feel, see, think and understand under the guidance of his kindly and humorous spirit.

THE MARTIAL ADVENTURES OF HENRY AND ME. By William Allen White. The Macmillan Company. $1.50.

Grandmother So Gay.

MRS. R. CLIPSTON STURGIS gives us one modern woman's idea of what it means to be a grandmother, and for that matter her ideas on pretty generally all the things that one thinks of in these days, in her *Random Reflections of a Grandmother*. She tells a rather comprehensive story of her life, making it clear the while that she has become indispensable to her family.

The story is told in the form of reflections, gay in the main and readable; so that you feel when it is read that you should have been won, but the strange part of it is that you probably haven't been. There are gibes at President Wilson which impress you by their needlessness, and however clever the Boston woman may have been who made the never to be forgotten remark to a friend who was leaving for the country, "If you see a tree kick it for me," no one looks forward to meeting another such person, which is what Mrs. Sturgis declares herself to be.

A publisher's note describes Mrs. Sturgis's style as vigorous and her language as unconstrained, and there is no lack of evidence of the truth of this. You wish she might refer less frequently to the "laying of thumbs to noses" or that the anecdotes could have been a trifle more subdued. What is to become of us if Boston grandmothers set us no example, but walk blindly about their homes, avoiding the sight of their children and grandchildren, in the arms of comparative strangers?

The sketches are cleverly done.

RANDOM REFLECTIONS OF A GRANDMOTHER. By Mrs. R. Clipston Sturgis. Houghton Mifflin Company. $1.